

“Doing your best” in a London secondary school: Valuing, caring and thinking through neoliberalism

Abstract

Focusing on pupils in the run up to their GCSEs exams, this article examines notions of success, worth and “doing your best” as they emerge in everyday life in a London secondary school. This discussion is in critical dialogue with debates on neoliberalism and the particular interdisciplinary relations they entail. Whilst I recognise that neoliberalism represents an important arena of shared exchange I also argue we need to be wary of writing out the complexities of lived experience as we utilise these analytical framings. Drawing from 14 months’ ethnographic fieldwork, I highlight how performance and audit shape everyday life in school. While these practices rest on processes of commensuration – the production of equivalence – a focus on the emergence of different forms of value and worth also draw attention to the incommensurable dimensions of selves also in circulation within school. Furthermore, a focus on the care extended by teachers to all their pupils, not just the ones defined as “successful” within the terms of audit and performance, highlights the importance of an ordinary ethics within school that cannot necessarily be analysed in terms of broader political projects of inequality.

Key words: Commensuration, education, ethnography, Britain, personhood, neoliberalism

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Introduction

It is a geography lesson for the lowest Year 11 set. They are working diligently on their course work, each focused on drawing diagrams. The teacher, Miss Jacksonⁱ circulates the room, crouching down to support individual pupils, whilst others wait patiently with their hands up. Miss Jackson eventually reaches Katie: “Miss, I can’t do this, I’m stupid”, she says. “Now you know we don’t say things like that, do we? The most important thing is that you’re doing your best, that’s what really matters,” replies Miss Jackson, before explaining again how to complete the diagram. Reflecting on the class after the lesson, Miss Jackson tells me how pleased she is with them: “they’re really taking responsibility for their learning”.

During my fieldwork in Collingson, a London secondary school, I often heard teachers encourage pupils to “do your best”. Pupils also spoke of “doing their best” and said that if they knew they have done their best, then they could be proud of the grades they received, whatever they were. These perspectives of pupils and teachers emerged within the context of an “unrelenting focus” on success in contemporary British education (Bradford and Hey 2007: 595), a policy discourse that relies on “testing, targets and tables” to evidence “excellence” (Jackson et al, 2010: 4). These national forms of performance and audit can further be contextualised within the emergence of a global education policy consensus, which has advocated a market-based reform of schooling (James et al, 2010). Research on education, from both sociology and anthropology, has chronicled and critiqued these transformations as an important part of the broader landscape of neoliberalism. Schools are identified as key sites in which young people are schooled in the demands of neoliberalism and its ideal subject, the autonomous, responsible and self-monitoring individual (Phoenix, 2004; O’Flynn and Petersen, 2007).

In these debates the concerns of scholars are clear. Stephen Ball writes “there is a real possibility that authentic social relations are replaced by judgemental relations wherein persons are valued for their productivity alone. Their value as a person is eradicated” (2003: 224). Whilst acknowledging these concerns, I also want to bring other aspects of ordinary school experience into focus. Drawing on anthropological work on value, and sociological work on commensuration, I focus on how notions of success, worth and “doing your best” emerged in relation to the Year 11 pupils in the run up to their GCSEⁱⁱ exams. As I illustrate, national performance indicators

such as league tables were experienced in everyday life in complex ways, sometimes encouraging a focus on commensurability – the comparative equivalence of selves, and at other times a focus on incommensurability – “fulfilling your potential” which foregrounded the individual worth of selves. I also consider the perspectives of the Head Teacher and the Head of Year 11, again arguing that their articulations of “successful selves” evaded straightforward classification, entailing both governance and care. Finally, drawing on recent anthropological work on ethics and the recognition that “everyday conduct is constitutively pervaded by ethical reflection” (Laidlaw, 2014: 44), I focus on the ways in which teachers were striving to do the “best good” in these circumstances (Mattingly, 2012) through their care of pupils.

While it may be true that “performance has no room for caring” (Ball, 2003: 224), I will argue that, at least as I observed during my fieldwork, performance and care were both present in everyday life. My aim is not to deny the structuring power of political and economic forces within school, but rather to consider the importance of everyday life as a site of action, relatedness, value and ordinary ethics as well (cf. Graeber, 2001; Evans, 2006; Das, 2010; Lambek, 2010a; 2010b, Back 2015). As I will suggest, while neoliberalism represents an important and useful “conceptual shorthand” (Moore, 2004) that can orientate scholars from across disciplines to a shared arena of explanation, debate and protest, we need to be wary of writing out the complexities of lived experience as we utilise these analytical framings. In the concluding section, I explicitly consider the conversation between disciplines that this discussion entails.

Performance, audit and neoliberalism

Influential work by both anthropologists and sociologists (amongst others) has charted the spread of “measuring, ranking, and auditing performance” as “one the most important and defining features of contemporary governance” (Shore and Wright, 2015: 421; Power, 1997; Strathern, 2000; Espeland and Stevens, 1998; Espeland and Sauder, 2007). Education is identified as key to the historical emergence of audit and performance, as well as a key site for the enactment of these principles and practices (Shore and Wright 2015). Ethnographic studies have highlighted the pervasive nature of these techniques, as well as their unintended or perverse consequences (e.g. Forsey, 2004). In these discussions, disciplinary differences are less obvious than what is shared: both the object of study (accounting, audit and performance) and the “close-to-homeness” of working in (higher) education (Strathern, 2000).

In this article, I draw particularly on work which examines the social processes of commensuration and quantification (Porter 1994, Espeland and Stevens, 1998; Espeland and Sauder, 2007). As scholars delineate, performance indicators such as

league tables – increasingly prevalent in education and beyond (see Merry, 2011) – depend on quantification and subsequent commensuration. Commensuration, namely the production of equivalence that “transforms qualities into quantities, difference into magnitude” (Espeland and Stevens 1998: 316), “shapes what we pay attention to, which things are connected to other things, and how we express sameness and difference” (Espeland and Sauder 2007: 16). Commensuration involves the complex coordination of processes constituted through the manifold actions of a huge number of actors in everyday life. As part of this, quantification creates specific kinds of relationships and motivates specific actions. For example, in the context of schooling, frequent and mundane activities of quantification such as the marking of pupils’ work, produces pupils as commensurate, and eventually feeds into much larger processes of calculation and comparison, such as school league tables. League tables utilise ratio measures enabling the difference between subjects to become metrical (Espeland and Sauder, 2007: 409).

Audit and performance are closely intertwined with (although not limited to) the broader proliferation of social science research on neoliberalism, particularly the “messy” governmentality approach that arguably predominates in both anthropological and education research. As commonly characterised, this approach, deeply influenced by Foucault’s latter work, focuses on the techniques, technologies and discourses of neoliberal governance and its production of particular kinds of ideal subjects (Hilgers 2010). Within anthropology, this approach has been advocated as a way to focus on locally specific neoliberalism and to tease out how neoliberal technologies and discourses interact with other forms of governance and power in particular contexts (Collier, 2012). In education research, the governmentality approach entails a focus on the ways government discourses, educational policy, and everyday practices in educational settings constitute neoliberal technologies of governance (see Kipnis 2011).

While these approaches are well-suited to the analysis of everyday life in specific settings, common pitfalls have also been identified. On the one hand, the focus on particular commonly rehearsed technologies of governance as neoliberal can lead to a “cookie-cutter typification or explanation” (Rose et al, 2006: 97) with a tendency for “confusing the ‘parts’ (techniques and so on) with some mysterious neoliberal ‘whole’” (Collier, 2009: 98). And, on the other, an insistence on flexibility can mean it is often unclear “which aspects of neoliberalism are being retained and which discarded in the formation of localized neoliberalisms” (Mains, 2012: 6). Further issues are identified by Andrew Kipnis, who argues that in contrast to structural and cultural approaches – which tend to characterise neoliberalism as an “ideology” – governmentality exudes “a sense that neoliberal governance functions, that it has successfully produced responsible and governable but alienated neoliberal subjects” (2007: 385). Thus, there is a tendency to assume that the

articulation of ideal subjects results in the actual creation of these selves in everyday life, while the processes by which this subjectification might occur are left under-examined (2011).

These governmentality debates form part of a broader debate on the nature of neoliberalism(s). While a baseline definition of neoliberalism as a “political project that is justified on philosophical grounds and seeks to extend competitive market forces, consolidate a market-friendly constitution and promote individual freedom” (Jessop 2013: 70) may arguably be broadly agreed. Beyond this there is much debate about the scale, nature and extent of these changes, or the degree to which they are structuring forces in everyday life (Jessop 2013). While some scholars have suggested ways to navigate its murky analytical waters (e.g. Kipnis, 2007; Hilgers, 2010; Peck and Theodore, 2012; Rowlands and Rawolle 2013), others have argued that the term has become so overused and ambiguous, it is no longer analytically useful (Mains 2012, Venugopal 2015). In these debates, traditional disciplinary boundaries often do not constitute lines of distinction. Key approaches, such as structural, governmentality or cultural (Hilgers 2010), are cross-cut by prominent scholars in anthropology, sociology, geography and other related disciplines.

What to do about such an unruly concept as neoliberalism? Henrietta Moore’s discussion of concept-metaphors suggests one path through this thicket. Similar to other widely used concepts such as the global or gender, neoliberalism can be understood as a kind of “shorthand”, “domain terms that orient us towards areas of shared exchange” (2004: 73) and enable conversations between disciplines, as well as beyond the academy. Concept-metaphors also enable the tensions between theoretical abstraction, and actual processes in the world to be maintained. At the same time, as Moore argues, “concept-metaphors that merely act as a descriptive gloss or posit causal forces that remain unexamined are essentially suffering – at the very least – from under-theorization” (79). Seeking to theorizing ordinary life beyond the well-trodden features of neoliberalism, in the following section I discuss how attention to values and virtues can help in this task.

Value and Values

In anthropological debates, value as “conceptions of the desirable” (Kluckhohn, 1951 in Graeber, 2001), encompasses production, consumption and exchange as created through human action (Munn, 1986; Graeber 2001; 2013; Lambek, 2008; 2013; Eiss, 2008). In this sense, value is defined contextually, and is not necessarily related to capitalism (e.g. Munn, 1986). From here questions can then be asked about the forms value takes, and the way it is evidenced and evaluated in everyday life. As David Graeber writes, “even though value is by definition always comparative, different values can be compared in different ways: proportionally, as with money...through some sort of ordinal ranking system, or as unique, particular

values” (Graeber, 2013: 225). This encompassing view of value enables an examination of the linkages and slippages between value (in the economic sense) and values (in the moral sense) as they are connected to action and the concurrent shaping of particular kinds of acting persons (Graeber, 2013).

Tracing anthropological debates on value is to encounter classic figures (e.g. Mauss and Marx), and the “faraway-ness” of ‘traditional’ fieldsites (e.g. the Kayapo of the Brazilian Amazon - Turner, the Gawan’s of Papua New Guinea – Munn) (see Graeber 2001). More recently these conceptual resources have been used productively to offer fresh insight on the classic sociological question of social class. Thus, in her seminal works, sociologist Bev Skeggs argues that the comparative project that enables personhood and value to be recognised as relational and contextually defined, can expand theoretical imaginaries in sociology. In order to “imagine or understand how value is produced and lived beyond the dominant symbolic” (2011: 509; see also Lamont, 2012, Paton 2014, Tyler 2015). Relatedly, focusing on anthropological studies of class in Britain, Jeanette Edwards, Gillian Evans and Katherine Smith highlight that: “[T]he anthropological preoccupation with persons as the emerging outcome of complex collective histories...allows for an interrogation of what difference it makes to an analysis of human social life to bring class and capital’s ordering and reordering effects in and out of focus” (2012: 4). While this article is not centrally concerned with class, these sociological and anthropological contributions highlight the ability of conceptual resources such as value to bring into focus dimensions of social experience that may be invisible when the focus is on the “ordering effects of capital”.

Examining the relationship between value and virtue, Lambek argues for the importance of keeping a productive tension between these or “risk participating in the neoliberal inclination to subsume ethical value in economic terms” (2008: 134). More broadly, anthropologists focused on ethics as a pervasive dimension of ordinary life have argued that the analysis of lives in terms of “rules, power, interest, and desire...” (Lambek, 2010b: 40) may not be doing justice to the richness of lived experience, and the effort our research participants put into doing the “best good” within the vagaries of everyday life (Mattingly, 2012). Thus scholars within the anthropology of morality and ethics are developing conceptual resources that can account for reflexive freedom and practical judgement as a pervasive part of lived experience (Mattingly, 2013: 304; Matza, 2012; Laidlaw 2014). This work recognises that ‘*[w]ho we are* is something larger than can be described or circumscribed by any single hierarchy of value or set of commensurable values’ (Lambek, 2008: 149; original emphasis). As I illustrate in the following sections, notions of value(s) and virtue(s) bring into focus incommensurate (and commensurate) understandings of selves, as well as the ambiguous sociality of school life, going beyond forms of governance so commonly rehearsed.

Policy change, performance and success

Nihal (Year 11, 16-years-old): “There’s no way people will be comfortable working at a higher level if [they] have been branded already as foundation, that’s a thing I don’t really like, that you can brand someone as ‘*that*’...you ruin people’s motivation by doing that”.

Collingson School is a large comprehensive, non-selective, mixed-sex school, in a London suburb. The data for this article is drawn from 14-months of ethnographic research focusing mainly on the Year 11 group, 15- to 16-year-olds in their last year of compulsory schooling. As well as attending their lessons, I spent lunch and break-times with pupils, and attended assemblies, non-curriculum days, school plays and other outside class activities. I also observed a range of the classes and extra-curricular activities of other year groups and conducted unstructured interviews among pupils and staff.

The emphasis on performance indicators and audit notably shaped everyday school life in the School both in regards to the work of teachers, and the organisation and experiences of the pupils. In the terms set by these performance and audit practices, Collingson School was considered a “success story”. A few years prior to my research, it had been placed on “special measures”, a designation of “failed standards” by Ofsted, the national inspectorate body. Shortly after this a new head teacher, Mr Finch, was appointed and subsequently the school was judged to be “rapidly improving”. The school was performing increasingly well – in terms of league tables – with the percentage of pupils achieving the key benchmark standard (5 GCSEs qualifications, grades A*-C) rising year-on-year. With its pupils from a range of “social backgrounds” and multiple ethnicities, many with English not spoken at home, Collingson School was considered a particular success story, combining league table success with equality of opportunity (Bradford and Hey, 2007).

As Gilborn and Youdell (2000) note, since the 1980s the pressure on British schools to be ever-improving, and particularly the “A – C economy” of league tables, has powered a number of changes in daily life in school, including a return to pre-1970s streaming according to academic “ability”ⁱⁱⁱ. Within Collingson School strategies were put in place to help Year 11 students achieve at least five A* – C GCSEs, this being central to how the school would be judged. As head of Year 11, Mr Forster said, “I have my data targets which I’m supposed to hit, set by the borough for that particular year group...school is judged on data, simple as that, when Ofsted come in, data is a massive part of what they judge on”. This was visually illustrated in the “traffic light” register for each Year 11 form group^{iv}. Every student was assigned a colour; either green (safely expected to get five or more GCSEs A* - C), amber, or red (not expected to achieve this). Interventions were particularly targeted at those

labelled “amber”, so-called “key marginals”, because their results would have most impact on the school’s league table results - a form of “educational triage” (Gilborn and Youdell, 2000).

Year 11s were streamed from their entry into school at eleven (based on a national standardised exam at the end of primary school) in evermore differentiated ways. Year 9 standardised exam results decided the level of GCSE to be taken (and thus the highest possible grade that could be achieved: see Gilborn and Youdell, 2000), and in Year 11 these sets were divided into two and linked to expected GCSE grades (for example A1 pupils were expected to get an A* in their GCSE, and A2 pupils to get As). Pupils were classified more broadly as very high attainers, high attainers, low attainers etc. and, for some teachers, these became ways to refer to and make sense of pupils, both within and beyond the classroom. For example, Mr Forster, describing a peer group he had seen me spend time with, said, “they’re interesting, because you’ve got a group of high attaining girls and they’re mixing with low attaining girls”. At the start of Year 11, the form groups, which had been together since Year 7, were reorganised according to these categories. One teacher told me that, although pupils were not told this, they guessed straight away. When a certain boy’s name was read out, for what she privately termed the “crème de la crème” form, the pupils exclaimed “What, him? Are you serious? He’s not even that clever” while others lamented “I’m in the thick [stupid] form”.

These divisions were taken up by pupils in their interaction with each other. For example, in Spanish class (which was not streamed), Lexy used this terminology as she discussed the new form groups; her group, she explained to Katy, was made up of the “highest attainers”. Katy, sounding hurt, replied, “my form’s not that bad, there are some quite clever people in it”. “No, your group is the key marginal group” contradicted Lexy. Katy was upset by this, “stop putting me down, I’m going to tell Mr Forster that you said that”. On another occasion, Lexy, visiting Samantha, Sejal and Tom (members of a different friendship group) one lunch-time, told them why she had changed maths sets:

Lexy: I worked really hard on my maths coursework so I could move up a set. I hated being in that [lower] set, people in it were just struggling to get a C because they didn’t try. Now I’ve been moved up, I’m in the third set. [In a sarcastic tone] I *might* even get a B.

Samantha: I’m in the sixth set, I’m the dumb one.

Sejal: I’m in A1.

Tom: I’m in A2 but I think we’ve got a better teacher, so even though you lot are supposed to be getting A*s I think we’ve got a better chance of getting them, which isn’t really fair on the people who worked really hard to get into the top set.

Here the pupils' conversation highlights the slippery relations between notions of innate ability ("being clever", "being thick"), hard work and teaching they were negotiating as they came to know themselves (and each other) as particular kinds of students. As I will discuss in more detail later, these also highlight the presence of both commensurate and incommensurate notions of value in the shaping of selves.

Thus while teachers were classifying attainment and progress against nationally established levels, for pupils (and also, at times, for teachers – as exemplified by Mr Forster quoted above), these ways of classifying their work were often experienced as "qualities" related to themselves in comparison to their peers, rather than as "quantities" related to national data. As Sellar highlights, while "audit culture" is often characterised as "lifeless abstraction" (2015: 133), simplifications do not replace the complex qualities being commensurated, but rather add to them. As part of this, commensuration entails a relationship between "data and affect" (132). In school, the individuating effects of commensurate value in the form of grades and ultimately "school data" emerged through an ordinal ranking system that was inherently relational. Practices of commensuration did not cancel out social relations but rather enabled particular forms of relationality - a hierarchical ordering of selves, the articulation of kinds of value, and evaluations of a particular nature. These joined other ways of organising selves and articulating value and different kinds of evaluative practice (see Author, in press), in the weave of everyday life.

Articulating success

As I examine in this section, notions of success articulated both the achievement of "good grades" and also the "drive towards individual responsabilisation and the self as enterprise" (Hilgers, 2010: 358). Here, while the self-regulated individual is foregrounded, I go on to discuss how these articulations of success can be considered in terms of care as well as governance.

In Collingson School weekly assemblies and mentoring sessions^v, and occasional "personal, social and health education" days^{vi} offered opportunities for the repeated transmission of the message to work hard, take responsibility, and the importance of GCSEs for future choice. For example, during one assembly, as Year 11s were gathered together for this weekly occasion, Mr Forster came to the stage. Standing in front of inspirational quotes on the projector (e.g. "I hated every minute of training, but I said, don't quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion" - Muhammed Ali), like a motivational speaker, he urged the group to "be professional". "You're not coming to school anymore, you're coming to *work*...school isn't for friends anymore, it's not for hanging out, you can *all* do well,

but you need to focus...I've told you before you're the best year in the school. And we want you to celebrate, to strive and to succeed. But we will *never* give up on you".

In line with this promotion of work, pupils were offered monetary rewards to motivate them to "work hard" and "take responsibility". After their GCSE mock exams, each Year 11 received a grade for their exam, a predicted grade and an "aspirational grade" for each subject. For each of these exceeded in their GCSEs, the pupils would receive cash directly. As money earned was based on personal targets, rather than competing with others, pupils were rewarded for "doing their best". However, this form of motivation was controversial within the school. One teacher commented, "It motivates children by money...the value of education for its own sake is lost, and no one else is questioning it, and I find that really depressing".

In discussing his "focus and vision" for the year, Mr Forster, further articulated individual achievements of success as part of a "broader package":

"Underpinning it, that they [the Year 11s] would be remembered for being the best year group to come through the school... People would speak highly that as individuals - they were fantastic kids, collectively they would be known as mature young men and women... and obviously the knock-on effect [of the pupils doing well in their exams] is the data side and the league tables, we move up the league tables and they see that we've given them value for money".

In this explanation, success in school (for the pupils, and for Mr Forster himself) aligns individuals and the institution, values (mature, highly regarded individuals), formalised value (data) and economic value (value for money – for the government and "tax-payer"). Pedagogic responsibilities were thus articulated by Mr Forster as extending beyond the academic. Similarly, the Head Teacher, Mr Finch, described his vision of Collingson becoming "one of the most successful schools in this part of London...in academic terms". But also in terms of, "really helping to shape the loving whole child, the whole being, and fostering notions of kindness and support".

Reflecting on a recent Ofsted report, which classified the school as "good with outstanding features", Mr Finch said:

"[T]he outstanding qualities were the caring aspect of it and the quality of the time we give the kids and I think that sends a hugely powerful message. And a very, very important part of my vision for the school was that we were recognised by Ofsted... What has been a great evidence base for us is that in the year group we started this with, there has only been one recorded fight

with the Year 7 boys. In the year previously we had about fifty. So while pupils will always have issues, and they'll always be robust and challenging things going on... at least we've given them systems and procedures and structures to unpack those issues".

From one perspective, Nikolas Rose's (1996) meta-commentary on the governance of subjectivities is evoked in Mr Finch's articulation of the personal ("caring", "quality time") through the public ("evidence base", "recognition from Ofsted") (see also Bradford and Hey, 2007). By arming pupils with what Mr Finch calls "systems and procedures", the school could be interpreted as constituting pupils for success, giving them the techniques through which they could become "self-regulating subjects". However, as Kipnis writes, just because ideal subjects are being articulated, does not mean they are being produced (2008). For example, while the hard-working, responsible individual was clearly articulated, demands for institutional success entailed the school shouldering more, rather than less, responsibility for pupils' individual success. Pupils' actions were structured as much, if not more, by the external regulation of the school than through self-regulation.

Focusing on the rise of "psychological self-work" in Russia, Tomas Matza highlights similar discourses articulated by psychologists working in an organisation providing "psychological education" to children of the elite. The use of "psy techniques" aimed to prepare children for the future through work on the self, and thus exemplified the "focus on subjectivity as a vital surface of government" (2012: 805). However, Matza also argues that if we take seriously the perspectives and aims of the psychologists themselves, a more political ambiguous picture emerges. The psychologists offered a different interpretation of their work, characterising it as a form of care, through which they could offer their young participants opportunities for better self-understanding, promotion of tolerance, and recognition that "their feelings matter" (807).

Similarly, taking seriously the perspective of senior staff in school involves appreciation of their aims and actions as "not only an expression of relations of power but also a form of care" (Matza, 2012: 808). The aim to foster notions of kindness and to provide young people with the skills to live happy, responsible lives, may align with several well-worn neoliberal tropes. But the comparative project of anthropology also allows us to recognise that responsibility and self-discipline are central concepts in a number of different times and places, (Trnka and Trundle, 2014; Laidlaw, 2014; Kipnis, 2008). Rather than colonise these terms as only evidence of neoliberalism, we can consider their ambiguity as articulated by our participants.

Doing your best and fulfilling your potential

As part of valorising hard work and inculcating self-responsibility, teachers often told pupils to “do your best” and “not compare yourself to others”. From this perspective, “doing your best” represented individual value produced through hard work and responsibility, regardless of outcome. This recurring notion in school cross-cut the hierarchical categorizing of attainment discussed earlier, and whereas the former only became meaningful in terms of a commensurate ranking system, “doing your best” placed emphasis on the incommensurate individual.

After the pupils received their mock GCSE grades, Miss Wheeler extolled her mentor group to “slog away...when you get your results it will affect the rest of your life”. But Marina, looking downcast, answered that even hard work was not enough. “I got shouted at by my mum about my grades. I worked as hard as I could but it just wasn’t enough for my mum, or my teachers”. Miss Wheeler tone was sympathetic – and emphatic as she encouraged Marina to engage in a self-assessment of success based on means rather than ends, “if it was good enough for you then *that’s* what’s important”. In a related example, Sejal – one of the “highest attainers” in the year and deeply invested in formal education - told me she had been predicted As and A*s in her GCSEs. I asked her if she would be disappointed if she did not achieve these grades. She answered; “I don’t think I would, because I’d still know I did my best, I would be disappointed if I got a C though, because that would mean I wasn’t achieving my best”. It was unsurprisingly difficult for Sejal to totally expel reference to objective grades, through which “doing her best” became visible at a certain level (a “B”) but not below (see Allan, 2010). Furthermore, as we saw above in the pupils’ discussions of math sets, understandings of attainment entailed both notions of innateness (“dumbness” or “cleverness”) and potentiality (“trying” and “working”). Doing your best here was about working hard, but it also evoked notions of individual innate potential of a certain amount (maybe less than peers, maybe more), that may or may not be fulfilled.

Similarly, ideas of “fulfilling your potential” were often discussed by Year 11s, including in relation to their choices for where to study next year. Many of the “high-attainers” were planning to move to more academically “successful” sixth-forms. This notion again articulated the combination of hard work and innateness, and the implicit recognition that potential differed between peers. However, the processes by which this potential would (or would not) be fulfilled were under debate among pupils. One lunch-time, discussing their sixth-form choices, William told Sejal he would be annoyed with her if she didn’t go to Clare House (one of the “top 5% sixth-form colleges in the country”) because she, “wouldn’t be fulfilling her potential”. “Why aren’t *you* going, then?” asked Sejal. Charles replied, “I want to be spoon-fed, at Collingson the teachers tell you exactly what you need to get an A”. Sejal disagreed, “Clare House does spoon-feed you, that’s what they do, they tell

you exactly what to do to get an A". In a different conversation, Lexy and Rhiannon also questioned their peers understanding of what it meant to fulfil potential. Lexy; "all these people that want to go to Clare House and go 'the teachers are shit' [at Collingson], but they're not. I mean, [they say] 'I'm not going to get good grades here, I'm not going to fulfil my potential'. "Well no because..." Rhiannon interjects, "you weren't *born* with A*, you *work* for that".

Incommensurability and ethics of care

So far, I have discussed how processes of quantification and commensuration shape the demands on teachers and the organisation of everyday life at school. However, I have also highlighted that while these processes may form the basis of official judgements of success, the lived experiences of value and worth in everyday life exceed this, as "quantities" become "(social) qualities". Furthermore, despite the forces of commensuration observable in school – the everyday production of equivalence between "attaining" pupils – I have also illustrated the observable and mundane aspects of incommensurability. In these ways I suggest, value is being produced in particular ways, rather than simply being erased.

As I discussed earlier, when school life is analysed only in terms of neoliberalism, the (unintended) consequence of this representation is that teachers may appear simply as mediums of governance, at the expense of a more multi-faceted understanding of the work they do. In this final part I further extend this argument through a focus on the notion of worth in school, as expressed by teachers to their pupils.

As part of the pervasive ethics of ordinary life, scholars have highlighted the importance of "care" as signifying "in the first instance, looking after, or looking out for, the well-being of others..." (Lambek, 2010a: 15). During my ethnographic research, I repeatedly observed the care teachers extended to their pupils, their genuine concern for their well-being and the effort invested in helping them. Pupils also recognised this. For example, Leah credited the "positive human recognition" she got from teachers as very important to her school experience. "The reason [the teachers] are great is because they care and they encouraged me...when I wasn't very good at the beginning they saw past that", she told me during an interview in which she reflected on her time in Collingson school. It seems unjust, after observing this as a central aspect of everyday life at school, to straightforwardly subsume these ethical relations within a broader politics of inequality. Thus a focus on "ordinary ethics" enables an understanding of a range of actions, practices and relations not necessarily encompassed by neoliberalism (Matza, 2012, Lambek 2008).

Indeed, teachers usually taught pupils for multiple years and got to know them well. They often talked together, in private, about pupils' personalities, motivations,

backgrounds and social groups. Some teachers were confided-in, and therefore came to know about many aspects of their pupils' lives. But more generally, teachers often expressed their care and affection for pupils. They cited this as one of the reasons they taught, despite increased top-down pressure, feeling denigrated by government policies, and the long hours they worked.

Mr Forster: "They [the pupils] understand that you care for them, you nurture them, you want to be there when things aren't going well for them... A pupil I can think of has a home life that is absolutely dire, home life has ruined her life but always, always came into school, would have massive kick offs with people, but knew that people in school actually cared for her and would get her through it..."

As this quote highlights, the work of care that teachers engaged in was often for those pupils who were not seemingly in the process of becoming good neoliberal subjects. While neoliberal governance is commonly rendered as successful in its production of responsible, self-regulating and governable subjects (Kipnis, 2007), daily life in school could not be characterised in these terms. In contrast, disruptions and eruptions by pupils were common in classrooms, and teachers continued to extend care to these pupils even when they were clearly not "working on themselves under the tutelage of neoliberal discourses of success" (Bradford and Hey, 2007: 600).

Furthermore, while teachers were under pressure to achieve certain markers, this did not mean they were uncritical of these processes. Some teachers framed their practices explicitly as against the grain of the top-down attainment targets and their implications. As Miss Gold explained she sought to "really see pupils", and it was through these acts of recognition that she showed the pupils they were not a "herd of cows" to be quantified but people worthy of attention. Showing them you "care enough" were things that "are hard to number and count". Miss Gold gave the example of a boy sent to her classroom by another teacher because he was disruptive. After the lesson, Miss Gold asked him why he was unhappy. He said he wasn't unhappy but angry, because he felt like he was treated unfairly. Miss Gold said they should go together to explain this to the teacher, then they could "start over". As Miss Gold explained, the work of recognition in this case was not to interact with him as a disruptive force, but as a person who she was "really seeing".

From this perspective, "doing your best" might be considered as a relational notion through which teachers were able to care for each pupil, regardless of the hierarchy of attainment. As we saw in this article's opening example, when a pupil in the lowest geography set called herself "stupid", Miss Jackson's response, "[t]he most important thing is that you're doing your best", can be interpreted as a notion of encouragement and validation that suppresses (however temporarily) the

importance of the pupil's positioning within a quantified and hierarchical system of academic worth. In this section, with a focus on ordinary ethics and relations of care, the incommensurate worth of pupils as persons becomes visible, regardless of any achievement of "success" in the commensurate terms defined by the school and broader processes of performance and audit.

"In the midst of things": bringing [in]commensuration, care and disciplinary boundaries into focus

What does it mean to do your best in school? As highlighted throughout this article, different kinds of value emerge in school and are compared by various social actors in different ways (Graeber, 2013). The focus on pupil attainment and performance indicators evidence the ways in which manifold processes are coordinated to enable quantification, calculation and equivalence at a regional and national level. While these processes enabled pupils to be considered as commensurate, we have also seen how these categories are experienced in terms of the "qualities" *of* people, as well as the "quantities" *between* people. While these aspects of school life encouraged a focus on comparison and hierarchy, at other points pupils were encouraged to "just do their best" and "not compare themselves to others". This foregrounding of the incommensurate dimensions of selves also emerged in relations of care between pupils and teachers. At the same time, in the weave of everyday life, it might not be possible, or desirable, to separate out these different ways of constituting success, value and worth into separate filaments but instead to consider the ambiguity their interconnections entail.

Drawing upon anthropological theories of value and virtue, which rest upon central anthropological concerns - intersubjectivity and comparison - enables us to recognise the different ways that value is produced, recognised and evaluated in school. In contrast to the analytical primacy of neoliberalism which often results in a surgical articulation of ideal subjects, these conceptual resources enable a more nuanced appreciation of some of the varying notions of value and worth that are person-producing, as well as being produced by persons (Graeber, 2013). Through these processes we can consider the way young selves are coming to know themselves in particular ways. As I have argued in this article, it would be reductive to analyse the actions of pupils and teachers only in terms of "the larger political projects within which their identities are implicated" (Das 2010: 398), even if (or especially if) we are critical of these projects. Thus, while neoliberalism is a valuable arena of shared exchange for scholars from different disciplines, engaging in this arena should not be at the expense of a narrowing of our conceptual resources. When research positions neoliberalism as both the overarching context *of* analysis, and the overarching framework *for* analysis, it risks the 'illusion of holism' (Kipnis 2007: 383) that may obscure as much as it reveals. In the process, all aspects of

daily life can come to appear commensurate as part of a broader project of neoliberalism.

The Anthropology of Britain has fruitfully drawn upon and contributed to broader “disciplinary preoccupations” to bring both British lives, and conceptual debates more clearly into focus (Edwards, Evans and Smith 2012, Degnan and Tyler, this issue). For example, the anthropological recognition that personhood is not self-evidently individual, drawing from the mutually constituted anthropological relationship between the “familiar” and “the strange”, has illuminated the complexities of British personhood as constituted intersubjectively and beyond assumptions of pre-constituted individuality (e.g. Ouroussoff, 1993; Carsten, 2004; Evans, 2006; 2010; Skeggs 2011, Degnen, 2012; Author 2016). This insistence on examining the production of persons in practice, rather than accepting an ideal, can similarly be extended to the neoliberal subject, who is invoked with surprising uniformity, in anthropology and sociology, in Britain as well as “further-away” places. Might the acceptance of this ideal have something to do a much longer history of uncritically accepting the “western person” as individual? (Ouroussoff, 1993). As Kipnis writes, however often the ideal subject is articulated in neoliberal policy and discourse, “[t]ruly autonomous, self-reliant subjects do not exist” (2011: 302).

The notion of bringing things into focus is also useful for thinking about the kinds of (inter)disciplinary conversations evoked in this article. As I have discussed, in debates on “audit culture” and within the shared arena of neoliberalism, points of convergence and divergence are often not premised on disciplinary identity but rather shared contexts, objects of study and conceptual perspectives. Meanwhile, comparative and intersubjective conceptualisations of value, are productively drawn upon and developed by both Sociologists and Anthropologists, to offer accounts that go beyond the conceptual limitations of such widely used domain terms as Social Class or Neoliberalism. It is the typically ethnographic claim of this article that the picture becomes much more complicated when we “encounter people in the midst of things”. And while this may be “part (but only part) of the distinctive mandate of anthropology” (Keane 2010: 65), it is not only anthropologists who are researching life in the process of being lived. As Les Back writes, “[I]nvestigating everyday life is not the province or the exclusive property of any single discipline. What they all share is an eye for the seemingly unimportant while showing the value of taking the mundane aspects of life seriously” (2015: 822). In this article, I have attended to these mundane, messy complexities as they arise in a British school, considering not only governmental techniques and discourses and the way they are taken up by social actors, but also the actions of everyday life that exceed and cut across these formations. In the process, I have

sought to show that ethnographically driven theory can contribute to the task of “fighting familiarity” (Delamont et al, 2010), in relation to the academic terms we employ, as well as the sites we study.

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ⁱ All pupils, teachers and schools referred to in this article are pseudonyms.

ⁱⁱ The set of qualifications taken by most British pupils aged 15/16

ⁱⁱⁱ The introduction of Value Added (VA) in 2002, which ‘measured’ the “value” each school had “added” to each pupil extends and further institutionalises the logic of differentiation (Bradbury 2011). Context Value Added (CVA, introduced in 2004) includes “contextual” factors, e.g. gender, ethnicity, first language, free school meals to the equations used to calculate progress, in response to criticisms that “social” factors were still not being taken into account (Bradbury 2011: 278).

^{iv} Units of administration in school, registration at the beginning and end of each day were conducted in form groups, and the form tutor was pastorally responsible for their pupils.

^vThese consisted of compulsory, after school sessions with a teacher and a group of about five pupils were part of strategies put in place to help Year 11’s achieve 5 A* - C GCSEs.

^{vi}When normal lessons are suspended and activities are focussed on these aspects of education.